Religionless Christianity and The Political Implications of Theological Speech: What Bonhoeffer's Theology yields to a World of Fundamentalisms.

Abstract

This article seeks to utilise Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity in a formative and constructive way to aid theological speech in the complexly secular and multi-faith setting of the twenty-first century. It will begin by seeking to highlight trends in unhelpful contemporary theo-politics, and to locate these in the interconnection of secular and religious forms of fundamentalism. It will then consider how a theological interpretation of Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity might assist in undermining such fundamentalisms. A further section identifies a three-fold positive benefit that Bonhoeffer's thought offers in the contemporary situation: a distinction between God and religion; a genuine understanding of the sovereignty of God; and an inability to separate secular-religious concerns from inter-faith concerns.

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1. Introduction

To appropriate Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity for contemporary theological speech might not seem an obvious or apparent thing to do. Whereas the last century

(to which Bonhoeffer belonged)[1] proved to be a century in which secularism sounded the loudest note,[2] with religions seeking to understand themselves in relation to what was perceived to be a great triumph for the antagonisers of religion, this century has begun in a remarkably religious vain. One needs only to look to headlines to see this: from the terrors of September 11th to the recent diplomatic incident over a British primary school teacher naming a class teddy-bear 'Mohammad', religion is a huge factor and concern in community relations both in terms internal to nations and in terms of foreign policy. If geo-politics in the twentieth century revolved around the Cold War, geo-politics in the present century revolves around the so-called 'clash of civilisations' between Muslim and Christian nations. To look, therefore, as a resource, to one who sought a 'secular interpretation' of the Bible, and who advocated that 'God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished',[3] may not seem wise for the twenty-first century theologian and ethicist.

As I have argued elsewhere, however, Bonhoeffer's articulation of 'religionless Christianity' should be understood as offering not primarily a sociological but a

[1]For an excellent presentation of Bonhoeffer's context, see Stephen Plant, *Bonhoeffer* (London: Continuum, 2004), ch. 2. For a more detailed biography of Bonhoeffer, see Bethge, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: Collins, 1970).

[2] At least in the case of Europe and communist countries. See Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case: Parameters of Faith and the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longmann & Todd, 2000); Peter Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World: A Global Overview', in Peter Berger, ed., *The Desecularization of the West* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 9-11.

[3] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Paper from Prison* (London: SCM, 1999), 16/7/44 (pp. 360-1) cf. 8/7/44 (p. 343). Henceforth, *Letters and Papers* is cited as LPP.

theological interpretation of religion.[4] Bonhoeffer was incorrect in his prophetic sociological expectation of an imminent end to the 'age of religion';[5] and contemporary sociologists of religion may well question Bonhoeffer's presentation of a unitary and unidirectional secularisation thesis,[6] especially from a globalised perspective.[7] As Berger puts it: 'the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false. The world today … is as furiously religious as it ever was.'[8] Religion has clearly not been brought to an end, as Bonhoeffer anticipated. In fact, far from it,

[4] This paper marks a sequel to a paper given at *The International Bonhoeffer Colloquium at the Freie Universität in Berlin* (13-14 July, 2007). See my 'Religionless Christianity in a Complexly Religious and Secular World: Thinking through and beyond Bonhoeffer', in: Ralf K. Wüstenberg & Stephen J. Plant, eds, *Religion, Religionlessness and Contemporary Western Culture* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 111-25. The following paragraph is a summary of the main points the paper sought to demonstrate, and the foundations on which this paper will build.

[5] 'We are moving towards a completely religionless time' (LPP, p. 279). This theme reoccurs in LPP 30/4/44, 8/6/44, 30/6/44, 16/7/44 & 'Outline for a book'.

[6] As in the likes of LPP 8/6/44 & 16/7/44. Such a view should be compared to the more recent depictions given in the likes of Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); David Martin, *The Religious and the Secular: Studies in Secularization* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969); David Martin, *Reflections on Sociology and Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); and Timothy Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life: An Ethnographic Approach* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999). This theme is also explored with regard to 'post-secularism' and Bonhoeffer in Christoph Schwöbel, '"Religion" and "Religionlessness" in *Letters and Papers from Prison*: A Perspective for Religious Pluralism?', in Kirsten Busch Nielsen, Ulrich Nissen & Christiane Tietz, eds, *Mysteries in the Theology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer: A Copenhagen Bonhoeffer Symposium* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), esp. pp. 275-83.

[7] To understand secularisation from a globalised perspective, the reader is again referred to Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*; and Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World'.

[8] Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World', p. 2.

religion has gained a heightened role in social and political discourse at the start of the new millennium. However, even if Bonhoeffer is not a prophet simply in his (failed) role as a seer of future trends and events, he is a prophet in another sense of the word – one who speaks out against the church's wrong religion, admonishing and challenging us to change our theology and our behaviour. Thus, for Bonhoeffer, it is not that sociologically speaking the world has come of age by its own secularity; it is rather that *theologically* speaking one must speak of 'a world that has come of age *by Jesus Christ*.'[9] Bonhoeffer tells forth to the Church, instructing it to focus more on Scripture and Christ in order to realise its true and religionless nature. This is the key to reading Bonhoeffer now: religionless Christianity is for Bonhoeffer a theological category and imperative, as opposed to any sociological description.[10] Though concerning a differing field, the words of Walter Moberly seem apposite:

> Theology classically is concerned with constructive questions of what belief and practice *can* and *ought* to be as a living reality in the present rather than

[9] LPP, p. 342, emphasis added.

[10] Religion as a theological category should, therefore, be thought of the attempt of humanity to locate God in a sacred space, and the related attempt of humanity at reaching God separate from revelation through the incarnation of the second person of the trinity. In short, religion as a theological category is innately related to idolatry. Religion is, furthermore, to understand and confuse this human localising of God to a sacred space and the penultimacy of human speech about God with God in Godself and God in God's own Self-revelation in the world. It is hoped that this article further teases out this theological understanding of religion in contrast to standard sociological definitions.

> simply descriptive, albeit suggestive, accounts of what it has been in the past.[11]

This desire to reform the faith, and to seek what theology ought to be saying and what the path of Christian discipleship ought to be like is ultimately a more helpful purpose that Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity can fulfil than a failed speculation on the future of society. Schwöbel puts this well in reference to Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity:

> A theology that follows Bonhoeffer's inspirations in reading the 'signs of the times' and in seeing the theological diagnosis of the religious situation as a central element of the theological task cannot simply repeat Bonhoeffer's diagnosis of *his* time and apply it to *our* time as if nothing had changed. Rather it seems much more in keeping with the spirit of Bonhoeffer's theology to attempt careful description of the phenomena and to try to assess them theologically.[12]

It is this theological interpretation of religionlessness that provides the basis for a useful appropriation of Bonhoeffer's ideas at a very different stage of world history.

This article seeks to use Bonhoeffer's theology in a formative and constructive way in order to offer a reading of the theology of the religions in the twenty-first century that

[11] R. W. L. Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament: Patriarchal Narratives and Mosaic Yahwism* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 152.

[12] Schwöbel, '"Religion" and "Religionlessness"', p. 176.

takes the political implications of theological discourse seriously. Rather than simply thinking *towards* Bonhoeffer, it seeks to think *through* and *with* his work on religionless Christianity in order best to fulfil its promise.[13] It will begin by seeking to highlight unhelpful trends in contemporary theo-politics,[14] and locate these in the interconnection of secular and religious forms of fundamentalism. From there, it will consider how a theological interpretation of Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity might assist in undermining such fundamentalisms. A further section will seek to apply this theological thinking to theo-politics, in order to see what Bonhoeffer's thought on religionlessness might yield to the contemporary situation.

2. Diagnosing the Problem: Fundamentalisms and Unhelpful Theo-politics

[13] Excellent presentations of Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity already exist, and it is not my purpose to repeat the work carried out so successfully by others. The reader is directed to Ralf K. Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life: Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 1998); and Peter Selby, 'Christianity in a World Come of Age', in John W. de Gruchy, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), pp. 226-245.

[14] Clearly, this article is not suggesting that all theo-politics are unhelpful: it is itself an exercise in theo-political thought. For positive and helpful exercises in theo-politics, see for example, Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmanns Publishing Co., 2005); and William T. Cavanagh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Discovering the Liturgy as a Political Act in an Age of Global Consumerism* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002). The focus of the article is, instead, the *unhelpful* theo-politics that can arise from fundamentalist approaches to religion. The article does not wish to replace these with what might broadly be called a secular liberal or pluralist approach. Rather, it seeks a genuinely faith-centred approach to these themes, beginning exclusively from *within* the faith community and justified on the grounds of faith.

Although I have elsewhere advocated that Bonhoeffer's presentation of the history of secularisation does not correspond to either a global or a contemporary perspective on the theme,[15] it does, nevertheless, correspond to the *mentalité* many religious people possess about secularisation. Many religious people are fearful that secularisation is taking place – and perhaps even has taken place – in a unified and aggressive manner.[16] Although recent sociological studies of religion suggest that the world remains deeply religious (albeit perhaps in Europe in a different way to the way in which it was before),[17] there still exists in many religious people an anxiety that the space and room for religion has been reduced. Even if the reality is one in which religion continues to thrive in most parts of the world and that Christianity (and indeed Islam) continues to grow, and even if it is the case that many people are not irreligious but simply religious in a different way, this does not determine that religious people will *perceive* reality to be thus.[18] Many religious people work from a basis of the fear that their faith is fizzling out rather than moving towards a great

[15] See my 'Religionless Christianity in a Complexly Religious and Secular World'.

[16] See Timothy Jenkins and Ben Quash, 'The Cambridge Inter-Faith Programme: Academic Profile', (Available <http://www.divinity.cam.ac.uk/cip/uploads/academic_profile.pdf >, accessed 29 January 2009), pp. 2-4, which differentiates between 'the secular settlement' and secularism as the 'horizon of civilization'.

[17] Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case*, ch. 1; Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945*, chs 5 & 6; Jenkins, *Religion in English Everyday Life*.

[18] Most estimates suggest the percentage of anti-religious or atheists at between 2% and 5% of the world's population. See, for example, Ian S. Markham, ed., *A World Religions Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), pp. 357-8.

eschatological *crescendo*:[19] one can see this simply in concerns over the numbers in congregations. Moreover, one can perhaps, strangely, also find this concern present underneath the surface of Bonhoeffer's discussions of religionless Christianity (although he clearly offers a rather different and radical resolution to this fear). The lack of the religious *a priori* of humanity means, in Bonhoeffer's words, 'that the foundation is taken away from the whole of what has up to now been our "Christianity".' And this *mentalité* of secularisation leads to an anxiety: 'It always seems to me that we are trying anxiously in this way to reserve some space for God'.[20] Elsewhere Bonhoeffer puts it thus: 'Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world'.[21] The anxiety of religious people is that the space in the world for God is perceived as being ever-reduced – that God is being pushed to the boundaries and not allowed to be present at the centre.

The anxiety Bonhoeffer observes does not only lead to a reaction in terms of the way in which his own theology develops. Fundamentalisms of all varieties also respond to the same perceived problem.[22] Fearful that their 'God' is losing space in a dualistic battle of good and evil, the fundamentalist seeks to restore 'God' to a central position, a restoration which she believes is necessary for society to survive and morality to be

[19] The preoccupation of American Christian fundamentalism with pre- and post-millennialism may well be symptomatic of this concern, attempting to make sense of the *seeming* decline of Christianity from an eschatological perspective.

[20] LPP, 282.

[21] LPP, p. 361.

[22] For the relationship between fundamentalism and secularity, see Berger, 'The Desecularization of the World', who speaks of fundamentalism as '*counter*-secularization' and as 'counter-secularizing forces' (pp. 6-7).

retained. Anxious that 'God' may be losing power, a power-struggle ensues between what is perceived as the secular and what is thought to be the power of God.[23] This serves to demonstrate the complex inter-dependence of fundamentalism and so-called secularisation. As David Ford puts it:

> The pathologies of the religions are of course made worse by their mirror opposites in the secular sphere, as the extremes reinforce each other. Unwise, fundamentalist religious dogmatisms feed off unwise, fundamentalist secular ideologies, and vice versa.[24]

Put otherwise, perceived aggressive secularisation which leads to a reduction in the perceived power of God in the world leads to the aggressive assertion of religion in a fundamentalist form, which in turn leads to the assertion of an even more fundamentalist and aggressive form of secularisation, which in turn leads to a fiercer form of fundamentalism from the religious side, and so on. Secularisation and religious fundamentalisms are therefore intertwined.

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[23] To understand the relationship between fundamentalism (in its Christian form) and power, see Martyn Percy, *Words, Wonders and Power: Understanding Contemporary Fundamentalism and Revivalism* (London: SPCK, 1996).

[24] David F. Ford, 'God and Our Public Life: A Scriptural Wisdom', *International Journal of Public Theology* 1 (2007), p. 78. This point is put similarly by Martin: 'The religions and the secular are in one sense opposites but in another way intertwined. There is almost nothing regarded as religious which cannot also be secular, and almost no characteristic appearing in secular contexts which do not also appear in religious ones.' Martin, *The Religious and the Secular*, p. 3; cf. chapter 4.

In an age of globalisation, the anxiety that leads to an aggressive and reactionist reassertion of the power of God in the world by fundamentalists (and which in turn leads to reactionism by extremist forms of secularisation) is exacerbated by a shift in power dynamics between religions. Whereas once those of another religion tended to be distant and exotic figures unassociated with normal day to day existence, a hundred years of vast improvements in transport and revolutions in communications determine that, even if the other religionist does not live next door, one is more than aware of her in the vast array of news carried to us from around the world through newspapers, television and the internet.[25] Far from a distant (and perhaps unimportant) figure, the religious other has become in recent times a real person who affects the communities and the world to which each of us belong. Christians may not only feel they are only losing ground to secularism, but also that the space for their one particular religion in society is also shrinking in terms of the increased role other religionists are playing on both a national and international stage. This has led some groups to feel the need to reassert a definitive identity, usually underscored in teleological religions by definitive apocalyptic determinations which are all too readily associated with contemporary and existent communities. Thus, fundamentalism has grown as it has fed off and reacted to those who replace its eschatological world-view with another – whether that be a future religionless society, or an eschatology based on another religionist's perspective.[26]

[25] The exception to this is Judaism as a diaspora religion, which has nevertheless in a different way contributed to the growing recognition of the pluralist society of which we are a part: the horrors of the *Shoah* determine that one cannot but recognise the importance of inter-faith commitments for a wise and civilised society.

[26] This is not only the case for Christianity in Europe. One can also see this in the rise of Islamic fundamentalism (or fundamentalisms given its manifestation in a variety of forms), which arose in

Fundamentalism, therefore, I would argue, is not simply about literal approaches to texts.[27] In fact, given that a literal reading of any scripture as one single text leads to an ever-greater complexity in the hermeneutical process, fundamentalism (at least in its Christian variety, the form I know best) often involves a deeply complex approach to individual scriptural texts to bring about a unity of meaning within the muli-vocality of scripture. Within the Christian tradition, this often involves long discussions on such themes as dispensationalism, covenants, soteriology and millennialism (pre and post) in order to allow the literal reading to stand by virtue of a complex hermeneutical process.[28] The essence of fundamentalism is thus not merely a literal approach to texts, but also a common belief that the deep mysteries of God are plainly and visibly obvious and given, and that one can draw a clear and definitive boundary around them: one can determine, for example, the eschatological determination of individuals and groups of people based on whether they are an insider or an outsider to one's own perspective; and the work, will and kingdom of

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parallel to Christian fundamentalism but with the added dimension that most Muslim countries were under the direct or indirect control of colonial Western Powers. See Ataullah Siddiqui, *Christian-Muslim Dialogue in the Twentieth Century* (London: Macmillan 1997), pp. 3-5; Youssef M. Choueiri, *Islamic Fundamentalism*, Revised Edition (London: Cassell, 1997; and Youssef Choueiri, 'The Political Discourse of Contemporary Islamicist Movements', in Abdel Salam Sidahmed & Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds, *Islamic Fundamentalism* (Boulder, Co.: Westview, 1996), pp. 22-24.

[27] Although literalism clearly is also an important factor as James Barr has pointed out. See James Barr, *Fundamentalism* (London: SCM, 1977), esp. ch. 3.

[28] It is also worth noting that most Christian fundamentalists (excluding those who belong to what might be termed 'extra ecclesial' sects such as Latter Day Saints and Jehovah's Witnesses) hold orthodox beliefs in terms of christology and the doctrine of the trinity, both of which are theological articulations on the Church that arise from scripture but are not explicitly there.

God is patently clear for all who – being on the inside – have eyes to see. Literal readings do not alone constitute fundamentalism, but a more general hermeneutic of identity formation vis-à-vis the world and others is constitutive of its nature. Rather than allowing God to speak to it through scripture, fundamentalism seeks, therefore, to speak on behalf of God, and claims to know the mind of God. Fundamentalists do not understand themselves as speaking as religionists or as those speaking on behalf of their own or their religion's interpretation of God; they instead believe their view of God to be equivalent to God. Their historically relative interpretation assumes ultimate meaning and thus becomes 'radical' in Bonhoeffer's negative sense of the word. This determines that ironically, their religion (and not God) becomes their God. Drawing boundaries of identity around their religion so sharply, and thinking in binary terms of insiders and outsiders, fundamentalists begin to draw very clear boundaries around God. In that way, fundamentalism is a form of idolatry – an idolatry of imagining if not of imaging: to presume the position of God by imagining that one's own religious or theological community can deliver the judgment of God is in some way a sin of idolatry. It enforces a definition and limitation onto God and seeks to shackle God to that pre-decided and normative definition and space which God is allowed to occupy.

This is not to say that any speech about God is idolatrous, nor is it to say that any attempt at speaking on behalf of a religious community is an act of idolatry. It is to say that one cannot equate a community's interpretation of God's speech or of the nature of God with God's speech or with the exhaustive entirety of the nature of God. Our speech, our religious communities, our interpretations, our theology, our religion

are always ours and therefore penultimate to the ultimacy of God.[29] The very Godness of God relativises all speech about God to the realm of at best the penultimate. This is not to say that theologians must understand their existence as simply within the confines of relativism; nor is it to say that there is, therefore, no sense in speaking at all if all claims are only penultimate.[30] The penultimate is still the penultimate – in a unique relation to that which is ultimate. But this is only so *qua* penultimate. The penultimate is not the ultimate because in the end is God. Fundamentalism confuses this issue, making that which is penultimate ultimate by confusing theological speech with God in God's ultimacy. Put otherwise, as a response to what is perceived to be the reduced space for God, God is actually allocated space by fundamentalists – space in which they perceive God is.[31] The localising of God to space is in essence the nature of idolatry – a confusing of God with the spatio-temporal limitations of the world (to which religion belongs).

3. Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity

[29] The language of 'ultimate' and 'penultimate' here arises from reflection on Bonhoeffer's categories of the 'ultimate' and the 'penultimate' (albeit applied to different areas of theological reflection) in Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, DBWE vol. 6 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), pp. 146-70. Space does not allow a thorough going and detailed discussion of these terms.

[30] One can also see this in Karl Barth. See Tom Greggs, 'Bringing Barth's Critique of Religion to the Inter-Faith Table', *Journal of Religion* 88 (2008), pp. 75-94.

[31] Or else, in other words, one might say that ironically by confusing the penultimacy of theological speech with the ultimacy of God, the fundamentalist is in terms of Bonhoeffer's ultimate – penultimate distinction, the 'radical' with disdain for creation and for the '*Inneren Wesensgesetze*' which pertain in the penultimate world. This is not only hermeneutically problematic, but also for Bonhoeffer contrary to the very nature of the incarnation. See Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, pp. 146-70.

Where, then, does Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity fit into all of this? Since, as I have stated, Bonhoeffer responds to the same anxiety to which fundamentalists also respond but in an entirely different and creative way, Bonhoeffer's response marks a helpful counter-balance to the excesses of Christian fundamentalism. Bonhoeffer's religionless Christianity offers tremendous promise in terms of the theo-political speech in an age in which the complex dynamics of secular-faith and inter-faith relations are all too evident: Bonhoeffer undermines the bad politics that arises from bad theology by cutting out the root of that bad theology. Moreover, Bonhoeffer's sketched response to these anxieties arises from scriptural reflection, which is the only ground on which fundamentalists (ostensibly at least) will allow debate. Bonhoeffer not only responds in helpful and creative ways to the same anxiety from which fundamentalists suffer, but he also responds on the same and the only basis that fundamentalists will allow – scripture. Let me present what I see as the promise of Bonhoeffer's work to today's age in three movements.

a.) Distinction between God and Religion

In response to the sort of definitions of fundamentalism I have offered above, religionless Christianity provides a great resource in its simultaneous consideration of God and religion.[32] Bonhoeffer is useful in countering aggressive fundamentalist assertions of so-called 'God' over and against secularism or other religions because of his refusal to allow the religionist to confuse her religion (which can only ever be penultimate) with God (who is ultimate). The 'God of the Bible' is only allowed

[32] Albeit the definition of religion is one which is not formed sociologically but theologically.

genuine space when the world 'has done away with the false concept of God'.[33] God in Godself is not rejected; that which is rejected is the *deus ex machina*, or 'God' as a working hypothesis.[34] What Bonhoeffer disallows is any confusion of God with so-called 'God' – any confusion of religious articulations of God with God in Godself. Bonhoeffer, I would argue, rejects any notion that theological questions about God are synonymous with historical questions about the development of religion or religious speech: the death of the 'God' of religion in the 'world come of age' allows the theologian to engage in articulating the God of the Bible, the God of the whole person. Even if those attempted religionless articulations of God fall prey to the same failings as religious articulations of God (as perhaps they inevitably will), they will at least do so with the recognition and suspicion of that failing, and thereby guard against any confusion of God with so-called 'God': their great achievement will not be articulating a religionless doctrine of God, but recognising the dangers and failings of confusing their viewpoints about God and God's action in the world with God in God's ultimacy.

Bonhoeffer's reflections on the Old Testament in December 1943,[35] prior to his move to religionlessness (albeit these reflections continue after that move),[36] may help to unpack this. In these reflections, Bonhoeffer points briefly to the unutterability of the name of God: 'It is only when one knows the unutterability of the name of God that

[33] LPP, p. 361.

[34] LPP, pp. 360-1.

[35] LPP, pp. 156 ff.

[36] This is prior to the 1944 shift to Bonhoeffer's mature thinking on religionlessness. See, for example, Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, p. 59.

one can utter the name of Jesus Christ'.[37]Although not fully developed, this issue of the unutterability of God's name by the Israelites is connected to Bonhoeffer's concerns about religion:

> I shall not come out of here a *homo religiosus*! On the contrary, my fear and distrust of religiosity have become greater than ever here. The fact the Israelites *never* uttered the name of God always makes me think, and I can understand it better as I go on.[38]

The revelation of this name to Moses is a revelation which simultaneously reveals and shrouds God.[39] This is evident in the very enigmatic nature of the name in response to Moses' request that God name Himself.[40] This point is not to deny the particularity of the God of the Bible – a particularity which is more than evident in God's identifying Himself as 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob', and in God's promise that He will be with this people, and in the narrative that follows this event.[41] This is no generalised notion of deity; this is the LORD, the God who is made known in the history of a particular people, and this new revelation to Moses indicates a 'subtle and complex blend of both continuity and discontinuity' with the stories that have

[37] LPP, p. 157.

[38] LPP, p. 135.

[39] My thinking here owes much to Barth's dialectic of veiling and unveiling. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956-75) [henceforth CD], 1/1, pp. 162-186 & 315-333.

[40] Exod. 3:13-15. Similarly, the bush that is ablaze but does not burn up is an indicator of this of the event itself being enigmatic.

[41] Exod. 3:12; 15-22; & 6:3-8. Biblical quotations taken from *The New Revised Standard Version*.

preceded it.[42] This is a particular God, on whom the penultimacy of our theological speech can reflect in a way which is uniquely penultimate; but this is simultaneously the God who cannot be grasped and idolised in our human imaginings as if those imaginings were ultimate as God is. The particularity and exclusivity of religious speech about God by religionists is upheld, and not reduced to the silence of mysticism or atheism, nor displaced by a bland lowest common denominator approach to religion as found in secular liberalism. But that very exclusivity is relativised not by an external pluralist mandate that requires all members of one religious tradition to recognise the validity of any other religious traditions, but by the very nature and ultimacy of God.

But, still, what has this to do with fundamentalisms and unhelpful theo-politics? The unutterability of God's name as a concern for Bonhoeffer in his rejection of religion may provide some theological way of interpreting his belief that the coming of age of the world removes false conceptions of God and makes way for the God of the Bible.[43] The God of the Bible, the name of whom the Israelites never uttered, is a God who is not to be confused with the world of religion. This is not to say that God lacks His uniqueness or His particularity.[44] It is not to say that as a result of this, all paths to

[42] Moberly, *The Old Testament of the Old Testament*, p. 163.

[43] LPP, p. 361.

[44] As is the case in theologies which look to a shared essence or core to religions. The unutterability of God's name is not synonymous with God being entirely unknown. It is in the history and narrative of the life of the Hebrew people, recorded in the Old Testament, that God makes Himself known as the God whose name is unutterable: the tension between the *kataphatic* and the *apophatic* must be maintained. Put otherwise, it is the God whose name is unutterable who is the Word that speaks and becomes flesh (Jn 1:1—14): God *reveals* Himself as the God whose name is unutterable.

God are of equal validity. But, it is to say that religion (however highly it is viewed by religionists) is only ever penultimate to the ultimacy of God. There are no fundamentals, therefore, but only one fundamental – God. All that is seen to be fundamental other than God is at best only penultimate to His ultimacy. It may, as the penultimate, stand in a unique relation to God's ultimacy; but it is still only penultimate to God. However important our religion may seem, it is not ultimate, and to see it otherwise (to presume it is God) is to engage in idolatry; for in the end is not religion but God. God's very particularity and uniqueness is one in which our perception and speech about Him falls woefully short of His reality. That He cannot be fully named (either because there are names we do not know or because His name is unutterable) reminds us of this. In this way, theology is able to recognise God's genuine sovereignty, rather than this sovereignty being reduced to a false kingship manufactured by human creating. God is not delineated or imprisoned by our religion, but allowed to be God, and allowed to reign.

Reclaiming the unutterability of God's name and the mystery of God's being, a mystery which is no ignorance but an ever-fuller shining glory, allows – in a suitably Lutheran turn of phrase – God to be God and not to be reduced to an element of humanity's religion. It prevents people of faith and theologians from second-guessing God and saves them from the sin of idolatry, an idolatry with enormous political implications. For in understanding the Godness of God, one is not allowed to confuse God with a space out of which He is being pushed. This means that religionists cannot define the places in which God is found in the world, and aggressively push at the boundaries of the religious or secular other. Instead, the religionist is forced with Bonhoeffer to recognise the transcendence of God (however particularly conceived at

least for each of the Abrahamic faiths) who is 'beyond in the midst of our lives.'[45] For the monotheist, this is all the more acute, as there *is* only one God who cannot lose space to the world but is the creator, sustainer and providential guide of the world. This is surely what it means for the theologian of religionless Christianity to read the New Testament in light of the Old. When we do this, we are enabled to see ourselves for who we are before God: we are freed from our sovereignty over God, aware of our own idolatry and less anxious to locate the idolatry of the other. And in this, we are careful of fighting (in whatever way) for our space, as we are aware that to locate and assign to God a space is to make of God an idol.[46]

b.) Genuine understanding of God's sovereignty

Secondly but relatedly, I wish to address the potential Bonhoeffer's re-interpretation of God's sovereignty has to aid unhelpful theological discourse, and the political implications that arise from it. While fundamentalisms seek to find God's power in the world in visible forms which echo or mirror human power,[47] Bonhoeffer writes:

> God lets himself be pushed out of the world and on to the cross. He is weak and powerless to the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us. Matt. 8.17 makes it quite clear that Christ

[45] LPP, p. 282.

[46] I am struck by Bonhoeffer's spatial language of identifying and locating boundaries for God, and of reserving space for God in comparison to God's being at the centre (LPP 30/4/44). It is this thinking that underlies much of my thought in this paragraph.

[47] The reader is again referred to Percy, *Words, Wonders and Power*.

> helps us, not by virtue of his omnipotence, but by virtue of his weakness and suffering.[48]

Rather than battling against secularity, and – indeed in certain quarters – enacting violence in order to seek victory in this battle,[49] Bonhoeffer directs the Christian to 'stand by God in his [i.e. God's] hour of grieving'; and it is this act which distinguishes the Christian from the pagan.[50] He writes further that there is:

> a reversal of what the religious man expects from God. Man is summoned to share in God's sufferings at the hands of a godless world […] To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way […] It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but a participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.[51]

These ideas remove unhelpful theo-politics at root by undermining false presentations of the *theos*. They remove the instinct, so well articulated by the great anti-theologian Feuerbach, to see God as 'man writ large'.[52] God's power and sovereignty is not a

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[48] LPP, pp. 360-1. This idea is also echoed in the second and third stanzas of Bonhoeffer's poem 'Christians and Pagans' (LPP, pp. 138-139).

[49] This is not only considered in terms of terrorist acts, but also in terms of such events as anti-abortion campaigns in the USA.

[50] LPP, p. 361; cf. LPP, p. 139.

[51] LPP, p. 361.

[52] See Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957). In his introductory essay in this volume, Barth speaks of Feuerbach's benefit in highlighting the danger of theology becoming anthropology (xxi). This danger is perhaps all the more significant when the

grander version of human power and sovereignty, but a sovereignty which is evident and most sovereign in God's willingness to be weak.[53]

Against the idols of our own imagining, Bonhoeffer seeks theologically to 'open […] up a way of seeing the God of the Bible, who wins *power and space* in the world by his weakness.'[54] Thus, our reading of scripture should be a reading of scripture before God in His ultimacy, and not a reading of scripture to justify our religious existence, power or stand point. Over and against fundamentalisms, Bonhoeffer offers a different reading which forces us to be critical of the religious presuppositions brought to the text, and to engage the hermeneutic of suspicion back towards ourselves. The point is not that we should not bring presuppositions to the text (how could we do other?), but that we should recognise these presuppositions and allow the text to contradict them. This is no neutral, context-free reading of scripture; this is reading scripture before the LORD whose ultimacy is pointed towards in the text, and whose ultimacy undoes our claimed knowing as God does.[55] Rather than an external liberalism or pluralism devaluing the text's uniqueness and call to the religionist (a pluralism which in itself leads to more aggressive forms of fundamentalism), it is the

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anthropology confused with theology is even confused with God (as can be the case in fundamentalisms).

[53] As Barth puts it in CD IV/2, p. 86: '… the sovereignty of God dwells in His creaturely dependence as the Son of Man, the eternity of God in His temporal uniqueness, the omnipresence of God in His spatial limitation, the omnipotence of God in His weakness, the glory of God in His possibility and mortality, the holiness and righteousness of God in His adamic bondage and fleshliness – in short, the unity and totality of the divine which is His own original essence in His humanity.'

[54] LPP, p. 361, emphasis added.

[55] This is the temptation involved in the original sin in Gen. 3:5.

very God pointed to in the text who cannot be confused with our religious speech about God. Scripture relativises the confidence with which the theologian can speak of God because scripture is not the LORD but points to the LORD who is within, but also beyond the text itself. Put otherwise, the Bible will not allow fundamentalism as the Bible relativises the Bible before God. It may still be the closest we can come to exceeding penultimate statements about God (I am not lessening its unique status), but it nevertheless belongs to that penultimacy and should not be confused with God. There must be no idolatry, not even biblio-idolatry. This reading of scripture takes on fundamentalism on its own terms with a more fundamentalist approach to the Word of God: it seeks the true God, the LORD, who is the God not confined within the Bible but is the God *of* the Bible, and it is suspicious of its own temptation to desire sinfully, as did Adam and Eve, to know as God knows. This message is the still, small voice of calm within an age that includes the earthquakes of acts of terror supposedly carried out on behalf of God, but at best only ever on behalf and at the behest of an idol.

c.) Inability to separate secular-religious concerns from inter-faith concerns

Bonhoeffer's consideration of religionless Christianity paradoxically directs us at once to the inseparability of God and religion, and to the distinction of God from religion. His theological imperative and prophetic telling forth of religionless Christianity directs Christians to recognise the religious garments we wear and to seek to purge ourselves of them. It recognises that our expression of God is and has been clothed in religion. But it simultaneously recognises that God and His Word cannot be confused with a particular stage in human religious evolution: 'The Word of God is

far removed from this revolt of mistrust, this revolt from below.'[56] Bonhoeffer advocates that the Christian live 'a "secular" life'.[57] However, he does so because it is by this that the Christian can come to share in God's sufferings in the world.[58] Bonhoeffer's concern is to seek the right and fitting articulation of Jesus Christ today in light of religion, secularity and God. He realises that any speech as a Christian about any one of these three themes involves consideration of the other themes. Moreover, Bonhoeffer refuses to accept any one definition of 'religion' (no doubt as part of his rejection of 'this revolt from below'). As Wüstenberg helpfully advocates, Bonhoeffer's 'loose' understanding of religion forces one back to theological interpretations of religion rather than settling on one single sociological definition of the word.[59] Bonhoeffer determines that one must think theologically, that is about God, when one seeks to interpret religion: his religionless Christianity is a Christianised version of the secular critiques of religion, and his concern is not for a sociological or anthropological exercise in defining terms but for a theological engagement in formative interpretation. Furthermore, while in seeking to speak of religionlessness Bonhoeffer determines that one should simultaneously think about God, about religion and about the secular, his drive towards religionlessness nevertheless also determines a recognition of the distinct nature of each of these three. There is a symbiotic intellectual relationship between each of these ideas: religious speech presupposes God; the secular presupposes religion and so on. Clearly, there is both unity and distinction here, and I wish to advocate that this unity and distinction

[56] LPP, p. 346.

[57] LPP, p. 361.

[58] LPP, p. 362.

[59] Wüstenberg, *A Theology of Life*, p. 159. For an example of this 'loose' defining of religion in Bonhoeffer, see LPP, p. 279.

has three beneficial implications for approaches to inter-faith, especially at a time of unhelpful political implications to theological speech.

Firstly, the recognition that one must not make an idol out of religion, and that God is not equivalent to religious speech about God (with all of the above provisos we have stated in terms of ultimates and penultimates) determines that the religionist at the inter-faith table, or any one religionist approaching any other, cannot presume to take the place of God (however uniquely or even exclusively one may conceive of one's God within one's own religion) in relation to any other.[60] Theological speech requires all the necessary humility that a recognition of the Godness of God should bring. In comparison to any other religionist, it may understand itself to be unique in its penultimate relationship to the ultimate, but – as a penultimate compared to an ultimate – it shares infinitely more in common with the speech of other religionists than it does with God.[61] Secondly, the symbiotic relationship between the secular and the religious determines that, in inter-faith relations, one is directed back to a recognition of the complexity of gathering as religionists in the twenty-first century,

[60] See here Greggs, 'Bringing Barth's Critique of Religion to the Inter-Faith Table', pp. 83-5. Also of note is David Clough, 'Karl Barth on Religious and Irreligious Idolatry', in Stephen C. Barton, ed., *Idolatry: False Worship in the Bible, Early Judaism and Christianity* (London, T & T Clark, 2007). Clough seeks to recognise the tension between Christian speech about God and idolatry by simultaneously emphasising humility and faithfulness: Christian speech cannot give way to saying nothing or understanding itself as of equal validity to any other speech about God; but nor can it proceed without recognising the dangers of idolatry.

[61] I would wish to relate this idea of the notion of *creatio ex nihilo*. From a Christian perspective, there is infinitely more in common between religions as a things belonging to creation (even if any one of those is understood uniquely in relation to each of the others) than there is between God and any one religion.

aware of the dynamics of secular-faith issues alongside inter-faith issues: religious people in our globalised world are confronted by both. Furthermore, as Christians we are confronted by other religions and secularity before God, and must seek wisely how to live before God who is LORD of all the world and all history. Thirdly, Bonhoeffer's unwillingness to define religion by any one definition allows the possibilities of recognising the need for multiple theological particularities in inter-faith relations.[62] This is not to state that the Christian involved in inter-faith dialogue should be a two-faced Janus. Rather, it is meant that any one-size-fits-all universal approach to inter-faith is never sufficient.[63] Different religions have to deal differently with each other, and resourcing wise dialogue between religions will require rethinking for each community, situation, generation and religion.[64] These three helpful pointers to resourcing inter-faith dialogue (however telegrammatically they

[62] I owe much in my thinking here to friends in Scriptural Reasoning in the University (né Scriptural Reasoning Theory) and to the attentive care given by all involved to the particularities of each.

[63] Here, I am rejecting each one of the generally accepted three-fold typologies for theologies of the religions (exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism). For a summary of these positions, see Gavin D'Costa, 'Theology of Religions', in David F. Ford, ed., *The Modern Theologians : An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century*, second edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

[64] For example, a Christian relating to a Jew is in a very different situation concerning issues such as supersession than a Christian relating to a Muslim; or else relationships between Abrahamic faiths might be resourced in a very different way to relationships between Abrahamic and non-Abrahamic faiths. For further philosophical reflection on the issues surrounding the particularities and difficulties in this type of dialogue, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988). MacIntyre writes: 'There are no preconceptual or even pretheoretical data, and this entails that no set of examples of action, no matter how comprehensive, can provide a neutral court of appeal for decision between rival theories' (p. 333).

have been stated) are crucial to working against unhelpful theo-political articulations of God in the globalised political sphere.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Bonhoeffer's speech about secular interpretations of the Bible and religionless Christianity benefits a world of fundamentalisms precisely because in speaking of the 'secular' it leads us back to this world and to this age.[65] This is a world and an age which faces conflict between different unhelpful theo-political understandings of civilisations and religions. Bonhoeffer helps us to recognise the reciprocity of the 'inwards' and 'outwards' life for the '*whole*' person: our spiritual life and our life in the world are at once reciprocal and one, and we should live as Christians 'just as much from "outwards" to "inwards" as from "inwards" to "outwards"'.[66] Not only should our faith affect the world, but the world must affect our faith. In an age in which there is unhelpful political rhetoric, incitements to hatred of the religious other and acts of mindless terrorism carried out supposedly in the name of God, the Christian cannot simply smuggle God 'into some last secret place',[67] but must speak of their faith in today's age with all of its globalised and theo-political problems in order to break the idols of our own creating. We must speak out because life is so central to the concerns of the Bible, just as it is to Bonhoeffer. We must speak out because, against the death and destruction that ultimately results

[65] This is a use of the word 'secular' in the literal sense of *saeculum* meaning this age or world.

[66] LPP, p. 346.

[67] LPP, p. 346.

from religious fundamentalism, in the words of Bonhoeffer, 'Jesus calls men, not to a new religion, but to life.'[68]

[68] LPP, p. 362.